**Selected Proceedings of the University of Florida Classics Graduate
Student Symposium
Volume 2
Introduction**

The University of Florida Classics Graduate Student Symposium is an annual meeting organized and hosted by graduate students from the University of Florida's Classics Department. Under the supervision of Dr. Eleni Bozia, and with the generous support of the Rothman Endowment from the Classics Department and the Center for Greek Studies, we pose questions and invite graduate students to consider and debate topics that push the boundaries of our field in an attempt to interpret antiquity, modernity, and the intersection between the two from our contemporary perspectives. Since the symposium's inception in October 2017, we have been welcoming graduate students from North America, Europe, and Asia to engage in and enrich these debates. Our global participants, who bring with them a vast array of disciplinary viewpoints, research interests, and expertise within the broader field of the humanities are invited to illuminate aspects of the Greco-Roman world, as well as debates centering on current social, political, and cultural issues. The first three symposia were held on the University of Florida campus (Fall 2017, Fall 2018, and Fall 2019). Pausing because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we resumed the symposium with a virtual conference in Spring 2021.

The present volume includes selected papers from the fourth Classics Graduate Student Symposium, held virtually on February 27–28, 2021, and entitled "Myths and Societies: A Cross-Cultural and Intertemporal Approach." We hosted presenters from the University of Chicago, the University of Glasgow, the University of Tennessee, the University of Turin, the University of North Texas, Fordham University, the University of Kansas, the University of Padua, the University of Warwick, the University of Maryland, the University of Georgia, the University of Cincinnati, and the University of Arizona, as well as an independent scholar. Given the international reach of these participants, the symposium included many fascinating and varied explorations of

numerous aspects of mythology and storytelling from a plethora of world cultures and traditions. We also invited six researchers to facilitate deeper discussion of the topics presented on each panel: Prof. Mallory Monaco Caterine (Tulane University), Prof. Laura Jansen (University of Bristol), Prof. Matthew Taylor (Beloit College), Prof. Rolf Strootman (Universiteit Utrecht), Prof. Kristopher Fletcher (Louisiana State University), and Prof. Kimberly Stratton (Carleton University).

Myths and Societies: A Cross-Cultural and Intertemporal Approach

Every world culture and tradition has its own relationship with mythology and storytelling: to make the theme of our symposium as capacious as possible, we chose this topic and ensured the boundaries of our interpretation would remain open. Our hope was to expand the scope beyond the Greco-Roman world to enrich the discussions and contribute to a comprehensive, interdisciplainry study of myths and socities across the world and throughout history. Because the symposium was held on Zoom, we were able to expand the program over two days and welcome a greater number of international scholars as both presenters and attendees.

The Greek term μῦθος (*mythos*), meaning "a spoken word," (LSJ, s.v. "μῦθος") is the linguistic origin of the English word "mythology." Despite the relative neutrality of the Greek word, the modern term "myth" often holds connotations of unreliability. For instance, the famous Homeric speeches, for which his characters are known, are often described as *mythoi*, and little distinction is made between truth and falsehood.[1] On the other hand, Roman writers expressed a complicated understanding of *fabulae* ("stories"), the Latin equivalent to *mythos*. While the word *fabula* generally referred to a dramatic play, the historian Livy used the term when discussing ancient origin stories that he deemed to be beyond

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[1] For example, see Homer's *Odyssey*, 1.358, in which Telemachus identifies *mythos*, or public speaking, as an activity for men rather than women, and 11.561, in which Odysseus beckons to Ajax to hear his *epos kai mythos* or "my word and what I have to say" (Murray, 1919, p. 441).

the scope of his reliable narrative (Bettini, 2006, p. 201).[2] Furthermore, Bettini (2006, p. 201) notes that an author would often use the term *fabula* pejoratively to refer to a story which the author themselves did not believe. The term *mythos*, then, as the origin of our "mythology" maintains the complex connotations shared by the Greeks and Romans— the veracity of a tale was only a small consideration, but it was by no means the most important indication of a story's worth to ancient peoples.[3]

Given the optional nature of truth in myth, the guage of its immortality lies instead in a story's manipulation of character, values, and the lasting cultural impression it leaves on a society. A myth can adopt a kind of cultural currency if it manages to enhance and enrich a culture's meaning or traditions, especially through glorifying particularly powerful or well-loved people, or capturing a universal human feeling. The English language, for instance, is particularly open to this immortalization of myth, as we enshrine certain myths in our many idiomatic phrases that become commonplace.[4] Although the details of an original *fabula* may evolve or adapt to match a new culture in which it finds itself, the crucial elements of a myth rarely disappear completely. Ultimately, cultures sustain these evolving, adaptable stories as long as the members of that culture "grant it power over their lives" (Tyrrell, 2010).

The scope of what is meant by the term "myth" is broad, and, as such, different disciplines approach this subject from many varied perspectives. Ancient Greek and Roman scholars tend to understand "myth" to mean any narrative concerning the works of gods, goddess,

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[2] Although Livy should not be considered a perfectly reliable narrator, it is interesting to note that even he would not believe such outlandish stories as a she-wolf raising two human children. See Livy, *AUC* 1.4.7.

[3] Moreover, as Tyrrell (2010) notes, ancient Greeks developed other ways to maintain reverence for myths, such as developing a rational explanation for the "fantastic and monstrous elements" found therein, or reading Homeric stories as allegories for their everyday lives.

[4] Consider such examples as "Achilles' heel" in reference to the Greek hero of Homer's *Iliad*, a "Herculean task," in reference to another Greek hero who was in fact worshipped in Greece and Rome, or the term "breadcrumbs," which reached the mainstream conscious from the tale of *Hansel and Gretel* by The Brothers Grimm.

and heroes (Tyrrell, 2010), whereas religious scholars tend to seek out the wider meanings or morals behind these fabrications (Bowker, 2000). Carl Jung understood myths as products of the "universal and collective unconscious" (Bowker, 2000), while others argue that myths are more unstable and lose their mythic status as soon as listeners cease to subscribe to their "power" (Tyrell, 2010), whether psychological or cultural." Scholarly interpretations of myth and its relevance within human society have also evolved over time. According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, the modern study of ancient Greek myth began in eighteenth-century France, after which Germany took over as the authority on such myths. C. G. Heyne, a crucial figure in this German study and conceptualization of ancient myth, saw it as "history," as "explanation of natural phenomena," and as "the product of a specific people" (Bremmer, 2012, p. 992). The twentieth century saw another shift in mythic studies, as the focus fell on both the ritual aspects of myth and its "explanatory and normative function" (Bremmer, 2012, p. 992). With this constant evolution and adaptable nature of myth in mind, this volume rejects any monolithic definition or perspective and instead leaves the boundaries and understandings of such a critical element of cultures worldwide open to the possibility of discussion, debate, and negotiation.

Modern scholars tend to categorize myths based on their themes and functions. There are, for example, initiation myths, elements of which appear in popular stories from ancient Greece, such as the Trojan War or the expedition of the Argonauts (Bremmer, 2012, p. 991). Mythology is not confined to fabricated characters, and, indeed, many historical figures are also the subjects of enduring myths and legends, such as former presidents of the United States of America George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Elementary students in the USA are often taught apocryphal stories about these figures that are designed to impress upon them core American values championed by these important historical forefathers.

Etiological myths often serve a similar purpose to initiation myths, as vivid stories describing the creation of natural phenomena, alongside the exciting embellishments that inevitably accompany them, remain fixed

in the cultural imagination long after a scientific explanation has been adopted into the mainstream. Such stories can even replace the need for scientific explanations of natural phenomena in societies and communities that do no place such value on science as do Western societies Even in cultures driven by scientific discoveries and technological advancements, however, myths continue to endure, partly owing to their entertaining nature.[5] As an example, although we now have a scientific explanation of Mount Olympus as a geological feature that was formed over millions of years of tectonic activity, the multitude of ancient Greek myths that surround the mountain and bring it to life with the many deities and stories enshrined there are not lost, and continue to coexist with these scientific discoveries. The notion of Olympus as home to the gods of old has embedded itself inextricably into Western culture, and modern media still maintains the trope of divine or superhuman presences residing high above the realm of normal humans.[6]

As suggested by the example of Olympus, mythology and religion share an intimate relationship with each other. Ancient Greek and Roman religious rituals, typically accompanying festivals, were often based on the foundation of a mythological story or understanding. For example, the Thesmophoria, a festival attended by women from across the Greek world, was rooted in harvest myths surrounding Demeter (the goddess of fertility) and her daughter Kore (Persephone). Henderson notes that the "pattern for, and explanation of, the festival's rituals, mysteries, and sexual symbolism" were based on the story of Persephone's abduction by Hades (2000, p. 448). Although little is known about this festival, because men were excluded from participation and its rites were kept secret, the Thesmophoria illustrates

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[5] Bremmer mentions the importance of mythology's entertainment value (2012, pp. 991–92).

[6] Consider, for instance, the book and movie franchise *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, which is explicitly designed as a story world in which ancient Greek and Roman gods remain alive and roam freely throughout the contemporary United States. Mount Olympus is accessed via the top of the Empire State Building in New York City at a pivotal point in the 2010 film *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*.

the intersection of mythology and religion that pervaded the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.

Mythologies Across Cultures

In a volume dedicated to the interaction of diverse societies with mythological stories, a few well-known examples of myths which illuminate the ubiquity of mythical elements in contemporary American life offer a prudent starting point. Although the term "myth" may now be commonly used to debunk popularly held beliefs (such as the childhood adage 'step on a crack, break your mother's back'), the more academically defined "mythology" offered above can still be found throughout popular culture and history as societal commonplaces.

The semi-divine hero Hercules (Greek Herakles) is an example of a mythical figure whose story has permeated many cultures and traditions in various disguises. Early material evidence, the clearest of which dates back to the late Archaic period at Thebes (Schachter, 2012, p. 664), note widespread worship of Hercules as a deific figure. The established cult of Hercules arrived early on in Rome at the Ara Maxima, the city's crucial founding site (Rose & Scheld, 2012, p. 666). Often named "the greatest of Greek heroes" (Schachter, 2012, p. 663) in the ancient Mediterranean, Hercules enjoys similar levels of cultural significance in modern-day America. Disney produced their hit animated movie *Hercules* in 1997, and various live-action movies of the Hercules myth continue to appear, most recently in 2014.[7] While the plots of such creations are not necessarily loyal to the specific details of ancient Mediterranean Herculean literature, the core themes, facts, characters, and expectations expressed by these aspects remain concrete. Disney's musical rendition of *Hercules* features uplifting, grand musical pieces that shape the myth around the company's highly successful movie model. Nearly 25 years after the release of *Hercules*, the pop artist Lizzo released a music video

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[7] A list from the website *IMDB* provides 28 movies, TV shows, and games based on Hercules and his mythological story, dating from 1964 to 2014.

for her 2021 song "Rumors"[8] that features prominent imagery suggestive of the singing Muses from Disney's film, exemplifying the legacies and evolution of myth that continue throughout society and culture.[9] Once one considers further the echoes of Hercules in the Persian Rostam, the Indian Bhima, or the Celtic Cú Chulainn, it is easy to see the global reach of this immortalized figure as a mainstay of popular cultures.

The prevalence of several concurrent but isolated flood myths throughout various ancient Mediterranean cultures allows the modern scholar to recognize how similar myths can develop independently. The tale of the Sumerian flood in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the story of Noah and the Great Flood from Hebrew scripture, and the Greek story of Deucalion[10] each present their own unique but related version of a flood myth that gave birth to human civilization. The overlap of details and themes within these stories demonstrates the dissemination of common ideas across borders and cultures and points toward a common human understanding of our origins on this planet.

The biblical version of the myth features God creating a flood to exterminate all life on Earth except for the righteous Noah and his family, along with a mating pair of each species of animal on the planet. God had witnessed the wickedness of mankind and wished to destroy them. Noah is given explicit (and detailed) instructions to take himself, "[his] wife[, his] sons and [his] sons' wives with [him]," along with "every living thing that is with you of all flesh," onto an ark, which he is instructed to build according to God's specifications (Gen. 8.16–17).

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[8] It is an amazing coincidence that Lizzo's song title resembles the translation of the Latin *fāmae*, built from the same *fā-* root as *fābula*, discussed above as the Latin word for "mythology" or "story."

[9] This is "a comparison Lizzo essentially signed off on, as the singer posted a fan-created version of 'Rumors' on Twitter, set to that exact scene in [*Hercules*]. 'Y'all really get me,' Lizzo wrote in a tweet, alongside a blushing emoji" (Chan, *Billboard*). See Twitter post link.

[10] Noah's flood story can be found in *Genesis* 6–9; the Sumerian flood story occurs in Tablet XI of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Gardner & Maier, 1984, p. 232); and the most prominent version of Deucalion's story comes from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.244–437 (Gregory, 1958, pp. 12-16). See Bremmer (1998) on Apollodorus' account of the Deucalion myth.

Similarly, the narrator of *Gilgamesh* states that "I made all my kin and family go into the boat. The animals of the fields, wild beasts of the fields, the children of all the craftsmen I drove aboard," (Tablet XI, Column ii, ll. 84–85) indicating only slight variations from the aforementioned biblical version. Scholars tend to agree that these similarities stem from a shared reliance on some possible earlier version used by the author(s).[11] Both versions emerge from geographically close cultures (in West Asia) that flourished in humanity's earlier recorded history.

The Greco-Roman flood story depicts a god (Zeus/Jupiter) causing the earth to flood because of humanity's immorality and lack of reverence. Again, select humans are saved: Deucalion, "the best of men," and Pyrrha, "devoted to the gods" (Ovid, *Met.* 1.322–23, quoted in Gregory, 1958, p. 12). Mount Parnassus provides the final sanctuary of dry land upon which the pair alight and begin to fulfill their role as the new progenitors of humanity. A rebirth of the human race after the natural extermination of evil is common to all these flood myths.

The commonalities between the Greek and Roman versions of this flood narrative point toward a likely entrenchment of some form of flood origin myth woven throughout the oral cultures of the ancient Mediterranean. Through such examples, therefore, the interconnection of myth throughout different cultures and countries is unmistakable. While Hilhorst (1998) provides a concise consideration of whether or not the Greeks (or Romans) were familiar with the biblical version of the flood narrative, a definitive answer to this question is not a crucial requirement for understanding this common myth type. The social value of such a story is so universally applicable that its immortality throughout history comes as no surprise.

Summary of Papers

The five papers selected for this volume testify to the central relevance of myth and how it has been woven into societal fabrics across the world throughout history. Each paper focuses on a unique culture and period (or a combination thereof) in order to explore the ways in

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[11] See Fisher (1970) or Noort (1998).

which particular myths or mythical elements may be produced, refashioned, appropriated, and received by cultures and societies over time. These submissions provide a poignant reminder that mythology is not confined within the boundaries of classical Greek and Roman stories, but rather marks a crucial thread in the great tapestry of human history and imagination. Myth is not only responsible for the broadening of the collective imagination; it also draws people together across borders and boundaries, exposing commonalities and shared truths across languages and traditions.

This volume opens with an exploration of weaving in epic poetry from Homer to Old English and Norse mythology. Claire Davis argues that weaving is closely tied to speech or storytelling, and the performance of weaving at a loom provides women with agency to contribute to or subvert the power dynamics of war and fate that pervade their narratives.

Allisa Diekman's chapter then explores the evolution of the *Cupid and Psyche* myth from Apuleius's *Golden Ass* through the writing of Giambattista Basile to its modern reception in Disney movies including *Beauty and the* Beast, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella.* Diekman traces the persistence of specific myth types and tropes present in Apuleius, Basile, and later renditions, arguing for the significance of Basile's role as an intermediary for the continuation of these stories.

Serena Peruch argues that the political propaganda of Antigonos Gonatos blended traditional imagery of Heracles and Asklepios with imagery of the god Pan. Using inscriptions and material evidence, Peruch demonstrates how Antigonos harnessed mythological figures to align his stories with those of his predecessors while also establishing himself as a new Macedonian ruler.

Zodiac imagery throughout Greek, Roman, and Christian religious practices, along with the architecture found in cathedrals, is the subject of Julia Wetzel's contribution to this volume. Wetzel suggests that astronomical clocks are deeply connected to both ancient and medieval religious space, juxtaposing the two in a public display.

Finally, Mattia Cravero demonstrates how the Italian writer Primo Levi employs elements from both biblical and classical sources in *The*

Truce to express the author's experience of life before and after the German death camps of World War II. Cravero reads Levi's work through a cosmogonical lens, showing how myth and reality can intersect to portray otherwise indescribable horrors and suffering.

Together, these papers demonstrate the universal anthropological constant of mythology across time, space, media, and cultures. Even as each paper explores different contexts and categories of myths, it remains clear that mythology continues to provide defining insights into the human condition both past and present, and each scholar represented herein highlights this defining feature of mythology to great effect.

Introduction Addendum

The present volume also features a paper from the fifth Classics Graduate Student Symposium, held in a hybrid format (in-person and virtually) on February 26, 2022, and entitled "At the Margins: New Perspectives on the Ancient Mediterranean." In our fifth symposium, we hosted presenters from institutions in Europe and the United States, including the University de Málaga, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Cambridge, the University of Florida, Florida State University, Duke University, and the University of Calgary. We also invited three distinguished scholars who engaged with the presented papers in lively and though-provoking discussions: Prof. Daniel W. Leon (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Prof. Victoria Wohl (University of Toronto), and Prof. Paul Dilley (University of Iowa). The stimulating exchange between our presenters and respondents opened up a space for profound reflection on the condition and positionalities of marginalized figures and voices in the Ancient Mediterranean world.

Conceptualizing the Margins in the Ancient Mediterranean

The literary and material culture of the people located at the center of ancient societies tends to be studied more often than that of others (Sulosky Weaver, 2022, p. 1). The histories and narratives of those people "at the center" have shaped what contemporary audiences

perceive as the sociocultural normality of ancient civilizations. Yet, the collective self-image of those "at the center" can only be fashioned through a process of contrast with other peoples and cultures, and especially those that find themselves at the margins of the dominant social center.

"When applied to individuals and groups," explains Sulosky Weaver (2022, p. 2), "'marginality' or 'social maginalization' references the social, economic, political and legal spheres where people who are disadvantaged struggle to gain access to resources, which leads them to be ignored, excluded or neglected." As such, marginalized individuals and groups of people exist within the social limits of their time and place as othered figures that are often disenfranchised at varying levels, in order for the image of the "center-people" to be shaped. According to Gruen (2011, p.1), "Denigration of the 'Other' seems essential to shape the inner portrait, the marginalization that defines the center, the reverse mirror that distorts the reflection of the opposite and enhances that of the holder."

Ancient cultures around the Mediterranean, among them the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, invented a number of identities under the broad umbrella of the inferiorized Other based on negative images, misrepresentations, and stereotypes that allowed them to justify marginalization, subordination, and exclusion (Gruen, 2011, p. 2). "Trading in stereotypes, manufacturing traits, and branding those who are different as inferior, objectionable, or menacing have had an inordinate grip on imagining the divergent over the centuries," (Gruen, 2011, p.1), and the ancient Mediterranean people were no exception to that. Consequently, in different places of the area around the Mediterrenean and during different periods in antiquity, foreigners and immigrants, women and children, slaves and prostitutes, as well as disabled individuals were perceived as the Other, and as such existed at the margins of the society.

Summary of Paper

The last paper of this volume focuses on the marginalized group of female slaves as presented on the theatrical stage of ancient Athens.

Charissa Skoutelas explores the role of slave women as knowledge bearers who have the ability to move the dramatic plot by holding access to or withholding critical information for the progression of the story. Skoutelas argues that the marginalized enslaved female figures in Euripides' tragedies and Aristophanes' comedies challenge the traditional power dynamics between masters and slaves pointing at the complexity of their role on and off the Athenian stage.

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